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FOR OPINION/EDITORIAL

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FARMERS AND RANCHERS URGED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE NATION'S 26TH CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE

Farmers and ranchers across the Nation are being asked to complete their 2002 Census of Agriculture report form. Please take the time to do so. You'll be doing yourself, your neighbor, and your country a service by helping to chart the course of American agriculture.

Every 5 years, USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) compiles census data, providing a snapshot of the agricultural industry. The census is the most ambitious and important compilation of all agriculture surveys, occurs only once every 5 years, and measures the tremendous changes occurring in the agricultural sector. The census is the only source of comprehensive data on production, economics and operator characteristics at the national, state and county levels.

The report form is detailed, and it has to be. The data are an invaluable tool for assessing trends and determining current needs of farmers and ranchers, especially at the local level. We use the census to help us better understand your needs and serve you. For example, agribusinesses use the data to determine locations of new facilities. State and local governments rely on the data to respond to emergency needs. Farm and ranch organizations use the data when proposing the policies that affect you. In fact, almost anyone who buys or sells agricultural products uses the data directly or relies on someone who uses these figures in some way.

The census will provide some new data this year, including computer usage on farms, production contracts, and characteristics about multiple operators on farms. It will be interesting to see what the new data reveal and what changes have occurred since 1997. That census counted approximately 1.91 million farms in the U.S., a slight drop from the 1.92 million farms counted in the 1992 census. Average expenses per farm rose from \$67,928 to \$78,771. Nationally, the average value of products sold jumped from \$84,459 to \$102,970. We also saw a 14 percent increase in the number of farms operated by women during the period 1992 to 1997. These were just a few of the national trends. Comprehensive, useful data are also available at the state and county levels.

Make sure to return your 2002 Census of Agriculture report form by February 3, 2003. Your responses are mandatory by law (Title 7, U.S. Code). That same law protects your data from disclosure to any individual, agency, or organization. Your response will help provide official facts representing all U.S. producers. If you do not receive a form by the end of January, call 1-888-4AG-STAT to make sure you are counted.

We all want to make informed choices based on facts. The data NASS provides are only as accurate as the reports from producers. That's why we need everyone's participation. Be counted in 2002. Fill out the census form accurately so you and the rest of the agricultural community have a complete picture of agriculture in our Nation. Remember, **You Make It Known – Agriculture Counts!**
